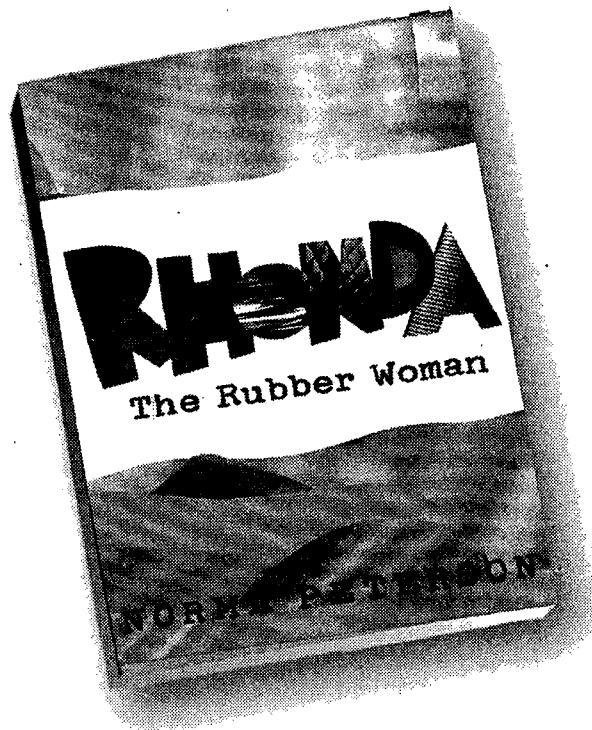


## Poets and Big-Mouth Dames

**Rhonda the Rubber Woman**  
By Norma Peterson  
The Permanent Press  
248 pages, \$24

REVIEWED BY MEREDITH SUE WILLIS



Set in working-class Pennsylvania of the '30s and '40s, Norma Peterson's first novel follows the coming of age of Nancy Sayers, an exuberant, double-jointed young poet whose life is shaped by her illegitimate birth and the consumer culture that surrounds her. She lives at a time when people are starry-eyed from advertising and wartime propaganda as well as the mythology that physical beauty leads to the ultimate satisfaction of romantic love. As a teenager, Nancy performs briefly in a carnival as "Rhonda, the Rubber Woman," but she is flexible in spirit as well as body. Toward the end of the book, Nancy muses on the meaning of her alter ego: "Maybe it was [that] however tightly Rhonda twisted and turned, she could always untangle herself and toss her hair."

Most of the novel is chronologically and emotionally organized around the story of Nancy growing up, but it is told through the different points of view of the three "Sayers girls"—Nancy, her mother Georgia and her aunt Cora. Georgia falls hard, fast and early in life for a lustful, married co-worker, who aban-

dons her when she gets pregnant with Nancy. Georgia shapes her life and interests around attracting and pleasing whatever man is available, whether it is Eddie, the club-footed carny, or Earl Speck, the company bookkeeper who has "chipmunk cheeks, and a belly that hung out over his pants like melted wax." Cora is sharper than her sister, but she is disappointed with her life and saddled with an explosive husband.

Above all, the novel is dominated by Nancy, who is its spunky heart, hope and primary voice. In spite of her *joie*

*de vivre*, she carries a chip on her shoulder because of her fatherlessness. She is largely self-educated, enriching her thoughts and conversation by reading a thesaurus and making lists of creative insults to use on her enemies. She also studies *Barlett's* for appropriate quotations for all occasions. At her stepfather's funeral, for example, she quotes Tennyson to her mother: "Sunset and evening star, and one clear call for me. May there be no moaning of the bar when I put out to sea." Then, she comments, "I'd memorized it just that morning, and I'd thought it sounded deep and hoped my mother would listen to the no moaning part."

Peterson's writing style, like Nancy's personality, is energetic and full of vigorous images. At one point, when Georgia collapses in tears, Nancy notices:

The untouched Cokes sat fizzing and hissing as I slumped on a chair and stared at the shadow of a tree dancing on the wall. One leaf kept dipping toward my mom's cheek and then away again. Up, down, up, down. It got close but never quite touched her.

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end with an unwanted  
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mornings after.**

This, of course, is emblematic of the relationship between mother and daughter, but the symbolism is lightly done and precisely right.

The novel's building blocks are the brand names, popular songs and catch phrases of the period. Peterson's witty use of slang and the special big-mouth-dame talk of the era is particularly delightful. While Aunt Cora's husband is overseas, she worries about staying away from the "good-looking boys who'd kid around and tell [her] she was as swell a blond as Betty Grable. There'd been temptations, she didn't mind admitting it. ... She lit up an Old Gold and sipped a cup of coffee. Cora never drank until 5 p.m. She had her standards."

The novel illuminates social history as well. In one section, Cora allows herself to be sold a modeling course:

Cora's smile tilted, her lips twitched at one corner. He's buttering me up, she warned herself. She'd anticipated this; she wasn't born yesterday. But she'd also thought about the alternatives. More years at the music store or go into a war plant. But she wasn't a Rosie Riveter type. ... She let her smile stretch broader. Besides, maybe she was a natural model.

Cora understands what is going on, but she is willing to fall in with the charade. This is a microcosm of what happened to the American working class—especially the women—during World War II. They weren't foolish enough to believe all the lines they were being fed, but they so much wanted the lines to be true that they took the bait—hook, line and sinker.

*Rhonda the Rubber Woman* is kindest to people who have energy and a certain defiance of narrow-minded convention. Chapter after chapter, Nancy takes a blow and comes out swinging, tumbling, making love and writing poetry. The novel's most pressing interest is the project of getting on with life. The Sayers girls embrace the truth that the world does not end with an unwanted pregnancy or a beating from your husband. Life is mostly the mornings after.

Following an incident early in the novel when the preacher finds Nancy

home alone and uses a wooden massage device to squeeze her breast, Nancy is neither passive nor triumphant. She reports Reverend Mackey's behavior, but he is not brought down by her courage. Even though she has to endure some accusations and disapproval, she finds support from friends, her aunt and a teacher. Eventually, the preacher's predations are curtailed when his wife decides to accompany him on all pastoral visits. This plot development is satisfying, humorous and very true to the way small communities deal with such situations.

The novel's humor and real-life complexity outweigh the author's tactical errors. It is unclear, for example, why only Cora's passages are written in third person. Moreover, Georgia, who has first-person sections of her own, comes across as whiny and stupid. For instance, describing Nancy, she remarks: "I hated it that a kid could make me feel so jittery, always looking at me with those eyes, always asking enough questions to feed an army." Her malapropisms and mixed metaphors are amusing, but it feels as if the author is setting her up for ridicule.

More seriously, the final few chapters of the novel slip dangerously toward a trite tale of true love overcoming social taboos. Through most of high school, Nancy has been attracted to Bobby Felker, who is a little older and almost too good to be true in his sympathetic understanding of her problems. They eventually become lovers, only to discover that they are half-siblings. This kind of high melodrama (as well as the romance-novel perfection of Bobby) weakens the end of the novel. Peterson, a freelance journalist, died in early 1997 while the book was still in production. It seems as if the final chapters are drafts rather than the writer's most polished work.

Despite that, *Rhonda the Rubber Woman* deserves to be read for its wit and exuberance and for its insight into what underlies cultural clichés. Above all, it should be read for its depiction of the lives of working-class women on the mornings after. ■

Meredith Sue Willis' trilogy of novels about growing up in the '60s has just been reissued by Hamilton Stone Editions. She lives in South Orange, N.J.

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## How Shoney's Ate Crow

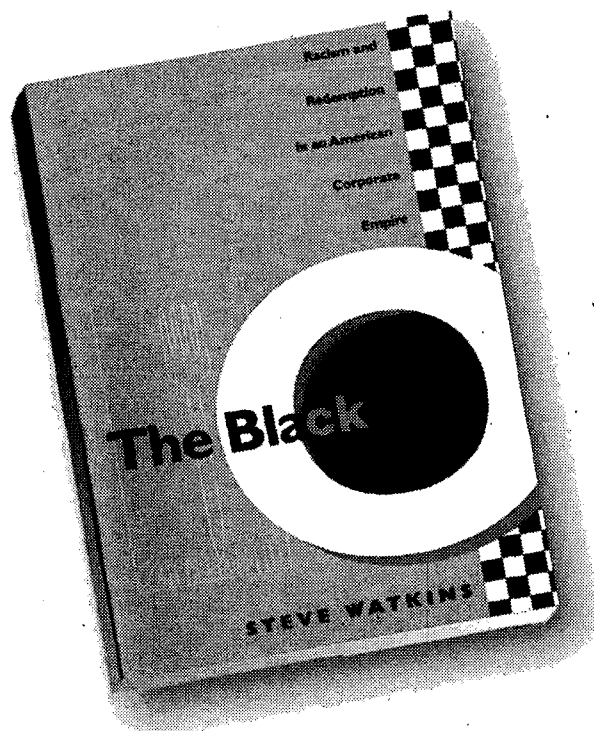
**The Black O: Racism and Redemption in an American Corporate Empire**

By Steve Watkins

University of Georgia Press

276 pages, \$27.95

REVIEWED BY NICK SALVATORE



**T**he *Black O* is a disturbing case study of how one American corporation systematically violated almost every national civil rights law that has been enacted since 1964. In a readable and thorough piece of reporting, English professor and journalist Steve Watkins explores how the family restaurant chain Shoney's Inc. sought to exclude African-American workers from all but its most menial positions. This was not some ancient pattern of segregation or an invisible glass ceiling, but an explicit company policy that began in the '50s and lasted until 1992.

Watkins' story begins in 1988, when Henry and Billie Elliott, a racially mixed couple (he is Japanese-American and she is white), were managing a Shoney's-owned Captain D's franchise in Marianna, Fla. Their area supervisors, under directives from franchise owner Charlie Robertson, repeatedly demanded that the Elliotts fire or harass black workers. The Elliotts were instructed to give black workers irregular schedules and sharply reduce their hours. The minimum goal was a 70 percent-white work force. Plus, the Elliotts were asked to remove black

workers from positions most visible to customers, like hostess or counter server, and relegate them to lower-paid, less public jobs, like sweeper or busboy.

The civil rights era notwithstanding, the Nashville-based Shoney's insisted that the place of blacks be narrowly defined and rigidly controlled. Unfortunately for the company, the Elliotts did not perform as their supervisors demanded. Over a period of eight months, they faced angry encounters with supervisors but refused to comply with the directives. The Elliotts were aware that by failing to follow the company line, they jeopardized their own jobs. When a black worker asked if his job was at risk, Henry Elliott's response was simple and direct: "I will probably lose my job over it, but I am not going to fire anyone just because they are black."

The end came a short time later when Ray Danner, the CEO of the corporation, visited the Elliotts' restaurant during one of his frequent inspections of his franchises. On the morning of the visit, one of Danner's subordinates called Henry and demanded that as few blacks as possible work that day. Dan-

ner, it was widely known throughout the company, would fly into a rage when a franchise employed too many blacks. Though she was aware of this, Billie Elliott had a black co-worker at her side when Danner walked into the restaurant that day. She said: "Mr. Danner, let me introduce you to my assistant, Stephanie Cooper." One week later, the Elliotts were fired, allegedly for the poor conditions that Danner discovered on his inspection.

The Elliotts ended up in the law office of Tommy Warren, a former star quarterback at Florida State University, who agreed to take their case despite the enormous resources that Danner and the corporation had at their disposal. Later, Barry Goldstein, a civil rights attorney whose private practice specialized in employment discrimination, joined Warren on the case. Filing a class-action suit on behalf of black workers "past, present and future" and white workers harassed or fired for refusing to carry out Shoney's race-based policy, Warren and Goldstein set out to prove systematic discrimination.

What they found was stunning. From top levels down, Shoney's followed an